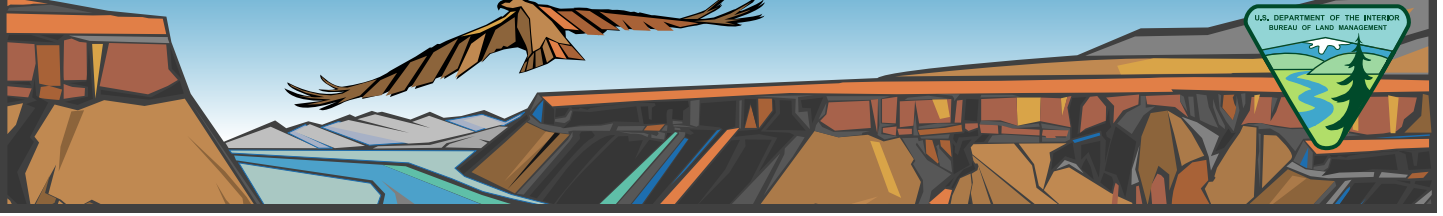


# Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



## Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

### Description/Size

Wing span: 67 - 72 inches

Length: 26 - 28 inches

Weight: 3.5 - 5 pounds



### Similar Species

### Habitat/Range



### Food/Diet

The Turkey Vulture is a relatively large raptor. Sexes are similar in appearance, females slightly larger than males. No color morphs. Up to six subspecies recognized. Plumage is dark brown overall; feathers on neck and upper back are iridescent. From below, the silvery flight feathers contrast noticeably with the darker body and forewing plumage – a distinctive two-toned underwing. It has relatively long and broad wings and long, rounded tail. In flight, holds its wings in a strong “V” position. Its head and part of neck is bare, with blackish bristles, generally reddish-colored. Head appears very small and “neckless” relative to body. Skin of nape and crown loose allowing neck to extend and feathered “collar” to retract during feeding, collar-preening, and heat stress. Bill ivory-colored, relatively short, and hooked, with large nostrils. Feet and legs are pink; legs generally stained white from excreta. Much variation in iris color; from buff to dark brown with speckling. Juvenile has gray head with black beak-tip; by first spring, head is pinkish red, legs pink, plumage is slightly darker than adult's; dark bill becomes more ivory-colored with age. Full adult appearance by second fall or winter.

Can be confused with other large dark raptors that soar. It is smaller than eagles but larger than all buteo hawks. Separated from these by the strong V-shaped position of the wings and the lack of sustained and strong wingbeats

Frequents open and forested habitats from lowland to mountainous areas in temperate and tropical zones. Preferred habitat includes open land and abundant carrion close to undisturbed forested areas for roosting and nesting. Breeding areas must contain large trees with cavities, cliffs, rock outcrops, or boulder strewn slides. Roosting habitat includes large trees or rock outcrops isolated or protected from human disturbance. Breeds from southern Canada to southern South America. Within western U.S. and Canada, breeding range is discontinuous. Breeding very local or absent in portions of Great Plains. Also sparse or absent in portions of the Pacific Northwest. Winters primarily in the southeastern U.S. into Mexico and south through breeding range.

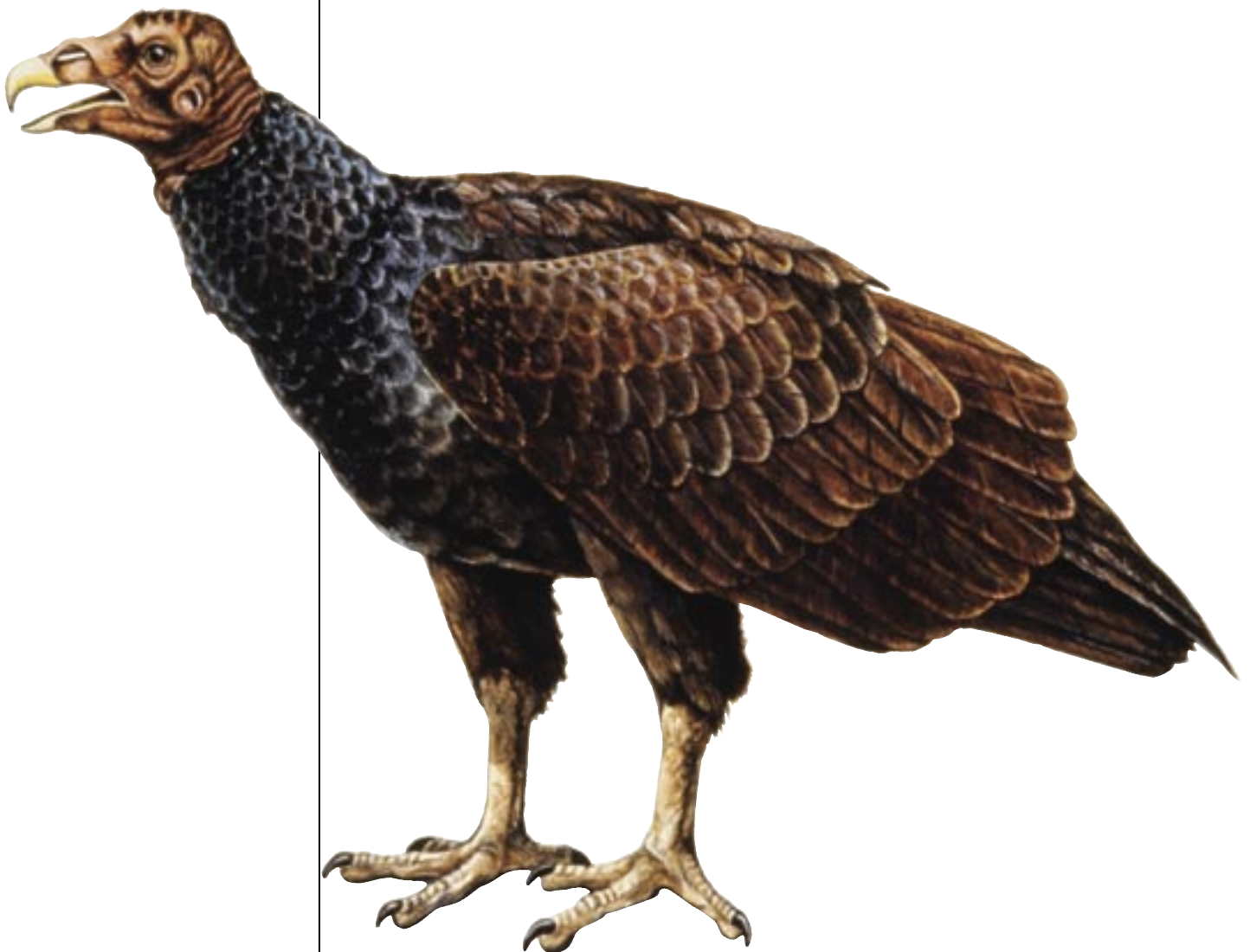
Feeds opportunistically on wide range of wild and domestic carrion. Mammals are most common food item; also birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates. Has very weak feet and beak so cannot kill prey efficiently but will occasionally feed on incapacitated or very young animals. Takes some plant material incidentally while feeding. When carrion is in short supply, it may eat rotting fruit and vegetables left in agricultural fields. Drinks water, but not always essential. Young in nest are fed regurgitated food. Uses both sight and its excellent sense of smell to locate carcasses. Can locate carcasses even in areas of dense vegetation. Does not easily locate freshly killed animals, but readily finds them when 1 day old, and prefers day-old carcasses to older ones. Cannot open thick skin, so must wait until large carcass is putrid or is opened by mammals or larger vultures. Generally feeds on ground; may wade into shallow water to fish or to feed on carcasses. Eats food almost entirely where found, or drags it off a few meters. Tends to gorge when feeding then perches in nearby trees. Forages solitarily, but individuals attracted to other feeding vultures often congregated at carcasses. Often locates carrion first because of olfactory sense, then followed and sometimes displaced by larger or more aggressive species such as the Black Vulture; in response, the Turkey Vulture specializes on small carcasses that can be eaten quickly.

## Voice

## Behavior

Lacks a syrinx so has a limited vocal ability. Mainly hisses, snarls or whines.

The Turkey Vulture is usually seen soaring above forest or open areas in long straight glides at speeds up to 35 mph. It is a graceful flier and rarely flaps its wings, except during takeoffs and landings. Its body and wings teeters gently in response to slight changes in winds. Spends much of the day in the air searching for food or riding thermal currents. Walks on ground. Also hops and runs, especially when competing at carcass. Will wade into water up to belly-feathers to feed or bathe. Leaves night roost after dawn and returns before dark. Communal roosts, from a few birds to several thousand, facilitate group foraging and social interactions. Conserves energy at night by reducing its body temperature. In the morning it warms up by spreading wings and raising its feathers. During hot weather it excretes on its legs (urohydrosis) for evaporative cooling, and also pants to cool down. During migration it can form into large flocks, known as "kettles", of hundreds or thousands of birds, which circle together in thermal updrafts. Northern and some western populations are migratory whereas southern and tropical populations are mostly resident. Migrates almost entirely by gliding flight. Usually low-level migrant, but may ride thermals to several hundreds of feet, then glide to next thermal, or rise as high as 21,000' above storm systems. Does not migrate on rainy or overcast days because of lack of thermals. May make short water crossings. Tolerant of human activity and adaptable in its diet and choice of nest sites. When threatened will regurgitate foul smelling food or feign dead. Young in the nest are aggressive towards intruders.



## Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2 eggs  
Eggs: Subelliptical to elliptical, dull to creamy white with scattered irregular brown spots, 2.8" x 1.9"  
Incubation: 34-41 days  
Fledge: 9 -11 weeks  
Disperse: 1-3 weeks

## Life Span

## Conservation Status

## Viewing in the NCA

## Interesting Facts

Spanish name:  
*Zopilote aura*,  
*Aura cabecirroja*

## Sources

Courtship displays include aerial circle flights and "dancing" on the ground. Believed to be monogamous and to mate for life or until one member of pair dies, but no firm evidence. Pairs not known to associate during migration or on nonbreeding grounds. Nests in a wide range of cave-like sites such as caves, deep recesses in cliffs, among boulders on scree slopes, cavities in large trees, lofts of abandoned or seldom-use buildings and in dense tangles of vines or shrubs. Most important requirement of nest site appears to be isolation from human disturbance. Eggs laid on whatever litter is present: bare soil, wood, leaf litter, punk, straw, etc., without apparent construction, but depression may form in substrate from weight and movements of incubating birds. Occasionally adult makes scrape, rearranges substrate, or adds to it. When disturbed during incubation, adult may fly off, stand besides eggs or remain on eggs in "death feint"; never aggressive. Replacement clutches are laid if the first clutch is lost. Age at first breeding unknown.

Longest recorded –16 years 10 months.

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the turkey vulture as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Population appears to be stable overall; however it is a species of concern in some regions. Apparently has few predators. Habitat loss, specifically nest sites, through timber harvesting is of some concern. Turkey vultures are susceptible to organophosphorus and other chemical poisoning when indirectly ingested through eating contaminated livestock. Western races may still accumulate DDT on Latin American non-breeding grounds. In addition to being prone to accumulate pesticides and other contaminants, the Turkey Vulture has a propensity to feed in agricultural and roadside habitats, making it vulnerable to accidental trapping, collisions with motor vehicles, electrocution, shooting, and the ingestion of lead from animals that have been shot. Its former persecution as a potential vector of livestock disease or as a predator of young animals has largely ceased, since these contentions have proved false. Collisions with aircraft pose a serious threat, especially to military. This species occurs at the same altitudes as military operations, and has a disinclination to take evasive action.

The turkey vulture is seen in the NCA from March through August.

- The scientific name comes from the Greek word kathartes which refers to a cleanser or purifier, probably referring to its scavenging activities, and from the Latin word aura meaning gold which may refer to the color of its head in museum specimens, but more likely derived from a Latin American version of "vulture" - auroua.
- Common name refers to resemblance to the Wild Turkey.
- Other names: buzzard, turkey buzzard
- Recent research suggests that New World vultures are more closely related to storks than to hawks and eagles.
- Olfactory organs unusually well developed for a bird; relative size of brain's olfactory bulb is ninth largest of 108 avian species.

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey

Bird Banding Lab - [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm)

Idaho Fish&Game - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birdspecies.cfm>

National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds

The Peregrine Fund - [www.peregrinefund.org/Explore\\_Raptors/vultures/turkevul.html](http://www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/vultures/turkevul.html)

Birds of North America Online - [http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Turkey\\_Vulture/](http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Turkey_Vulture/)

US Fish and Wildlife Service - [http://ecos.fws.gov/tess\\_public/servlet/gov.doi.tess\\_public.servlets.VipListed?code=V&listings=0#B](http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/servlet/gov.doi.tess_public.servlets.VipListed?code=V&listings=0#B)

<http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/intrnltr/mbta/mbtandx.html#h>

Illustrations - courtesy of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development  
Map - The Peregrine Fund